

Through the Wall

B Pent 24--Hebrews 10:11-25

This past Monday marked the 20th anniversary of the day people broke down the Berlin Wall and East Germans flooded through into a suddenly expanded world. This moment, of course, was a touchstone for the fall of Communism in general, then accelerating throughout Eastern Europe. So this week, with the help of YouTube, I took a little nostalgia trip back through some of the footage of that momentous time. In the videos I found, ordinary people are hacking at the wall with pickaxes, cement cutters, hammers and chisels while the crowds around them shout encouragement. There are hoots and whistles, cheers, rhythmic chants of this collective body of people "provoking one another to good deeds" as our text from Hebrews would have it. In one shot, a man stands defiantly on top of the wall, haloed in water from a firehose beyond. In another, a segment of the wall falls away. Hands reach up to grab it. People cheer and applaud as a young man climbs onto the fallen section and begins to wave a huge German flag. Through the gap beyond him, in a world the crowd before him hasn't seen for thirty-eight years, bare trees reach the fingers of their branches up toward the sky.

What an amazing moment. A new reality is born. The world is suddenly, and unalterably, a different place. A people which have been divided from one another are made into one, and although it is by no means the end of the troubles which dog human enterprise everywhere--corruption, conflict, the hoarding and misuse of power--East Germans will now join their Western brothers and sisters in confronting these issues within a radical new context of freedom and unity.

That's very much what baptism is about, it seems to me. We baptize people into a new community in acknowledgement that they have stepped through a wall that separates us from each other and from God. Christ opens up a hole and like the West Germans, those of us in the church welcome those who are stepping over from the other side into community with us. Also like the West Germans we are by no means a perfect people. We speak the same language and struggle with the same social problems on our side of the wall. We erect our own walls! We wrestle and sin, lose our tempers, curse, lie, cheat, argue, and worse. But just as there is a very real difference between a communist context and a democratic context, so there is a very real difference between a secular context and the context of a spiritual community.

As our passage from Hebrews today observes, baptism places us into a community that is defined by hope. We live in hope that God's promises are real, that that someday there will truly be peace among nations and an end to hunger. And maybe even more locally, we live in hope that these terrible economic times will come to an end, that those struggling with unemployment will find jobs, that here in Michigan, there is a tomorrow that is brighter than yesterday or today. This is a difficult time to try and hold onto such hope. There are so many reasons to despair, as our food pantries fill with people and empty of food, as people lose their homes and their jobs and the political process seems increasingly for sale. (You know, just a couple days ago I read an article about how senators and congressman from both sides of the health care debate are allowing lobbyists to write statements for them. The same phrases are appearing in both republican and democratic speeches!) So there seem to be few reasons for hope.

But at a time like this, it may be worth observing that there were few reasons for hope in East Germany also. For thirty-eight years the furthest west East Berliners could go was a vertical horizon of gray cement and steel, splashed with graffiti. And then one day, the wall started to fall, and ordinary people came out from their homes bringing whatever tools they had to participate in the extraordinary work that God was doing.

Today we baptize a new member into that hope and the community that is built around it. We reach through the gap in the wall, that "new and living way that [Christ] opened for us," and take hold of her hand and pull her through to this new context of freedom. We welcome her into this priesthood of all believers, to join us in ministering to one another and to the world in hope. And we do these things in the name of Jesus the great high priest who promised that wherever we are gathered in community, wherever even two or three of us are gathered in his name, he is with us.